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ABSTRACT

A survey administered to 53 African American freshmen at Hampton University (Virginia), a private historically black institution, gathered information on attitudes toward the learning of foreign languages in general and toward German second language learning specifically. Only two respondents had studied two or more years of German in high school, but all had studied some language before college enrollment. German was the fourth most frequently cited language they felt should be taught in college, ranking behind Spanish, French, and Japanese; Latin was the fifth most cited language. Of the five languages, German was ranked least enjoyable to learn and next-most difficult. Respondents reported little background knowledge about German culture, and what they had was based on their knowledge of World War II. Perceptions of the German people were largely negative and stereotypical. The students felt it was relatively important to know a foreign language for their overall education, but relatively unimportant to know German. Improved recruitment for German enrollment among the African American population is recommended. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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German-Language Instruction at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Future of German in (African) American Higher Education

by Walter Rankin

Introduction: The Present State of German Language Instruction at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

According to the July 1996 summary report of the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), in which the future of German in the American education system is thoroughly examined, one of the primary goals of the profession lies in placing those issues facing the German profession into "a larger socio-political and educational context" (Byrnes, 253). The report lists one of the major dilemmas facing the profession as the closing of programs at all levels of instruction due to low enrollments and fiscal demand, which leads directly to an increasingly competitive academic job market for Germanists. Consequently, the report concludes that one of the major courses of action required to achieve a "New Positioning of German" is to reach beyond our normal boundaries and to recruit actively "new students beyond the usual pool. . . to be found among non-traditional students" (Byrnes 255, 258). African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) present our profession with just such a pool of students.

According to the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), HBCUs account for approximately 70 percent of the 43,000 African Americans who graduate each year from accredited American colleges and universities, producing an estimated 30,000 college graduates every year (*Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Internal Revenue Service* 7). From both an academic and practical and point of view, HBCUs consist of a group of potential students largely ignored by our profession. Of the 143 HBCUs evaluated in the *Black Excel Listing* (http: //cnct.com/home/ijblack/hbc-list.html), less than five percent offer

German, Spanish, and French as subject majors to their students. Of the HBCUs listed in *Black Excel's Top Ten*, only four (Clark Atlanta University, Howard University, Morehouse College, and Xavier University of Louisiana) offer all three languages as major subjects.[1] While also listed in the top ten HBCUs, Fisk, Spelman, and Florida A & M Universities offer French and Spanish as major subjects but not German. The remainder of the top ten, Hampton, North Carolina A& T, and Tuskegee Universities, do not offer any foreign languages as major subjects. If Germanists in the American education system are truly intent on repositioning German language learning beyond its traditional boundaries, they must encourage curricular reform not only in more "traditional" institutions, but in HBCUs as well in order to strengthen the presence of German in all academic institutions.

Historically, HBCUs were founded to provide access to higher education for African Americans separate from and equal to exclusively white institutions. Yet a comparison of *Black Excel's Top Ten* with a random selection of fifteen fourth-tier universities cited by *U.S. News Online* (http://www4.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/natu4_nf.htm) reveals a strong disparity in the offering of German as a foreign language major. Again, while only four of the top ten HBCUs offered German as a major subject, thirteen out of fifteen fourth-tier universities offered German in addition to Spanish and French.[2] Students at HBCUs are promised and expect a specific cultural environment to aid them in developing and understanding their African American heritage and identity. Yet, with regard to foreign language study, the advantages of HBCUs can produce some narrowing side effects. The 1996 *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* asserts its global aim, "The imperative envisions a future in which *all students* will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at leat one other language, modern or classical [emphasis added]" (National Standards 1). The majority of HBCUs graduate students who are not proficient in

another language; thus, their graduates face greater difficulties in today's multicultural job market and pluralistic society. They are greatly disadvantaged by the HBCUs which do not offer even the possibility of majoring in a variety of foreign languages.

African American Students' Attitudes regarding German-Language Learning: The Survey Group

The following survey was administered to 53 African American students in three separate English 101 classes at Hampton University, a private HBCU with a student body of around 5,000. The survey was composed of two primary sections. The first section centered on the attitudes of African American students towards the learning of foreign languages in general (see Rankin 1997 for detailed results and analysis of the general language survey). The second section, and the focus of this article, looked specifically at the attitudes of African American students in relation to German-language learning. Hampton University is the second largest private HBCU in the nation and is ranked as a second-tier regional university by *U. S. News Online*. Surprisingly, it is also among the majority of HBCUs which do not offer German, Spanish or French as a major subject. In fact, German is seldomly offered, and then rarely beyond the second year of instruction.

This survey reveals the attitudes of African American students toward the German language and culture at a transition phase before they have actually attended a regular semester of college instruction. The students were part of the Summer Bridge Program at Hampton University during which they took college-level, prerequisite courses prior to Fall registration. All of the students were recent graduates from high school, and they had no prior college education. None of the students was enrolled in a foreign language course over the summer. Encouragingly, forty percent (22 respondents) said they would take a foreign language course as an elective, even if there were no general education language requirement.

Part I: The Student Sample

The first part of the survey focused on student demographic information. The participating students represented 17 states from every region of the country. Thirty percent (16 respondents) of the students already lived in Virginia where the college is located, while others were from New York and New Jersey, Florida and Georgia, Wisconsin and Illinois, and California. The survey also revealed the diverse majors of the students: communications (10 respondents), natural sciences including biology, physics or chemistry (10), psychology (10), business (7), and English (6). Thirteen students were undecided. Each of these majors could benefit from knowledge of a foreign language and culture, including German with its strong ties to the sciences and the European Economic Community.

Students were also asked if they had studied German or another foreign language in high school. While only two had studied two or more years of German, all 53 respondents had studied at least one year of a foreign language: 39 had studied two or more years of Spanish; eight had studied two or more years of French; four had studied two or more years of Latin; and one had studied two or more years of Italian. Thus, all of the respondents had had some exposure to a foreign language and culture prior to their enrollment at the university.

Part II: Conceptions of German and other Foreign Languages

The second part of the survey was designed to gauge student conceptions of German in relation to other foreign languages (see Appendix for summary of data). Students were first asked to list on their own the five languages they felt should be taught at the college-level. They were then asked to rank these languages in order of perceived importance to their liberal arts education. Cited by 23 students, German was the fourth most frequently listed language well behind Spanish

(50 respondents) and French (45), but also ranking behind Japanese with 26 respondents. Latin (18) was the fifth most cited language.

The respondents were then asked to rate the languages they listed in terms of enjoyability (a "1" being LEAST ENJOYABLE to Study, and a "10" being MOST ENJOYABLE) and perceived difficulty (a "1" being LEAST DIFFICULT and a "10" being MOST DIFFICULT) to see if the students would equate the two aspects. While the students did rate Spanish most enjoyable (average: 7) and easiest (4.5), and French and Latin roughly as enjoyable (French: 5.8; Latin: 6.2) as difficult (French: 5.3; Latin: 6.7), surprisingly, they rated Japanese second in enjoyability (6.3), while ranking it most difficult overall (9.8). In contrast to Japanese, German was ranked least enjoyable (5.1), but nearly as difficult (9.0). Clearly, these African American students do not equate the perceived difficulty in learning a foreign language with how much they believe they would enjoy learning it. Indeed, the relatively high enjoyability rating awarded Japanese reveals a group of students who would readily study a culture quite different from their own. The strong disparity between these students' perceptions of learning Japanese and German indicates that they have specifically-formed prejudices concerning the German language and culture.

These findings support the results of Davis' extensive 1990 survey of introductory language courses at HBCUs and their students' attitudes toward foreign language study. That survey concluded that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (94 percent) felt that a commitment to foreign language study by their institution would have no negative impact on the development of their own cultural identity (see Davis 1990). When asked which language they felt was least connected to their own culture, most students listed Japanese (13 respondents), but German was listed as a close second (10 respondents). One respondent chose Spanish, one chose Latin, and only two chose French. Conversely, when asked which language they felt most connected to

through their own culture, the majority of the students (29 respondents) in this survey claimed that *no* foreign language was connected to their heritage. Six cited Spanish, and four noted French. Only eight of the respondents pointed to Ebonics/BEV, and none of the respondents chose Latin, German, or Japanese. Even though English was listed as the native language of all the students, and they were enrolled in English 101, none of the respondents apparently considered – or perhaps knew of – any relation between the English language and its Germanic roots.

Part III: Student Attitudes Toward German Language and Culture

This section of the survey focused exclusively on the attitudes of the students regarding the German language and culture. The first two questions were asked to determine the general attitudes of these African American students toward the German nation and the German people. In a free-association exercise, the students were first asked to write down five words that they associated with Germany. This activity also revealed the background knowledge students brought with them concerning the German people and culture. Based upon their responses, the students proved themselves most familiar with the recent, and mostly negative, history of Germany. The most frequently mentioned responses: Adolf Hitler (18); Nazis (15); automobiles, including BMW, Mercedes, and VW (13); beer (10); the Berlin Wall (9); the Holocaust (6); and Auschwitz (4). It should be noted, however, that most students could come up with no more than two or three words which they connected to German. Thus, they brought little background knowledge with them from their high school education, and what background they did have was largely based on their knowledge of World War II.

The next question asked students to describe their impression of the German people. Considering their responses to the initial question regarding Germany, their answers to this question are, not surprisingly, almost exclusively pejorative. Their responses evoke images of the

stereotypical German found in bad propaganda films, and show that these students have a profoundly negative preconceived idea of the German people. The most frequently cited character traits: cold/hard (16 respondents); strict/ disciplined (13); evil (12); aggressive (4); intelligent (4); and mean (3). The severity of these students' impressions of the German people, culture, and history corrolates strongly to their low rating for the enjoyability-level of learning the language

In addition to evaluating student conceptions of learning German with regard to difficulty and enjoyability, the survey also focused on their impressions concerning the practicality of learning the language. The remaining questions asked students to evaluate the importance of knowing a specific foreign language for their general, liberal arts education and their future employment. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with "1" being NOT IMPORTANT and a "10" being VERY IMPORTANT), students rated the importance of knowing a foreign language for their overall education an average 6.3, while the average importance rating for future employment was a strong 7.1. Again, these figures concur with Davis' findings which revealed that African American students at HBCUs were quite aware of the practical value of knowing a foreign language (Davis 1990). When asked to rate the importance of a knowledge of German specifically, however, the average scores fell dramatically. Students rated the importance of a knowledge of German to their liberal arts education an average 2.6, well below the importance rating for Spanish (8.7), French (7.6), and Japanese (6.3). Similarly, the average importance rating of German for their future employment was a 2.7, again well below the ratings awarded to Spanish (9.4), Japanese (8.3), French (7.7). Additionally, the practicality/employment ratings for all other modern languages was significantly higher than their initial enjoyability ratings (Spanish: 9.4/7; French: 7.7/5.8; Japanese: 8.3/6.3), while those of German were distinctly lower (2.7/5.1). These students clearly believe that knowing a foreign language is important to their education and future employment, but they

specifically do not consider *German* one of those necessary languages. Indeed, the students' practicality rating for German falls far lower than the disconcerting ratings for difficulty and enjoyability.

Conclusions

In discussing multi-ethnicity, de Varennes notes, "It can be said that the special relationship between ethnicity and language is of vital importance in the analysis of ethnicity problems" (de Varennes, 291). HBCUs graduate nearly 30,000 students each year who could and should be encouraged to study the German language and culture. German courses can be incorporated into the curricula of HBCUs to help students focus on problems of ethnicity and racial issues which continue to affect People of Color who are not American. Often forgotten in the instruction of German are those People of Color who speak German as their native language. African American students could learn a great deal from German People of Color, as evidenced by studies such as Thränhardt's "Patterns of Organization among Different Ethnic Minorities," Kesting's "Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust," and recent texts like Oguntoye, Opitz and Schultz's 1992 *Farbe bekennen* [*Showing Our Colors*], which details the day-to-day experiences of young German Women of Color. *Multikultur und Bildung in Europa* [*Multiculturalism and Education in Europe*], a collection of essays edited by Allemann-Ghionda dealing with racism and multicultural issues in a united Europe, could also be included in course syllabi.

The July 1996 summary report of the AATG notes that two of the primary problems facing the educational environment for the study of German in the United States are the "reduced usefulness of German (in light of other demographic and economic realities and the dominance of English in many academic disciplines) and perceived difficulty of German" (Byrnes 255). As this study shows, these issues are especially prevalent at HBCUs. While entering African American

students consider foreign languages in general an important facet of their education, they do not view German as a useful language connected to them culturally, while they consider it one of the most difficult languages to learn overall. Additionally, a corollary can be drawn between higher SAT scores and those HBCUs offering German, Spanish, and French as major subjects. The average SAT scores of the 40 HBCUs reporting SAT scores is approximately 770. The average SAT average for the four HBCUs encouraging foreign language majors is 900, well above the HBCU average, but also above the national 857 SAT average for African American students (http: //www.fairtest.org/satscr97.htm).[3]

The AATG summary report suggests that the field develop a pre-collegiate German instruction track which can continue through collegiate instruction and a separate German instruction track which would be collegiate only. Perhaps such a track could circumvent the negative perceptions expressed by pre-collegiate African American students like the ones who participated in this study. The summary report also lists active recruitment for students "as the second most important task facing the profession," behind the restructuring of curricula. In considering the "New Positioning of German" in American education, the position of those historically on the periphery of our profession must be included. Historically Black Colleges and Universities and African American students should be targeted and integrated to help accomplish the difficult and rewarding tasks as set forth by the AATG.

Notes

[1]Clark Atlanta and Howard Universities and Morehouse and Spelman Colleges are nationally ranked third-tier institutions by *U.S. News Online*. All except Spelman offer Spanish, French, and German as major subjects; Spelman offers Spanish and French.

[2]Third-tier universities surveyed include: Andrews, Cleveland State, Idaho State, Illinois State, Kent State, Old Dominion, Texas Woman's, Akron (OH), Houston, La Verne (CA), Louisville (KY), New Orleans (LA), South Dakota, Wayne State, and Wright State. Of these, Cleveland State offers an M. Ed., but not a B.A. in German. Texas Woman's University offers a degree in Spanish, but not in French or German.

[3]The FairTest site lists ACT and SAT scores of various racial and economic groups. Its purpose is to bring attention to discrepencies in and unfair uses of standardized college entrance exams. This article does not examine these controversial issues, as the HBCUs themselves have reported their African American students' SAT averages. Thus, the SAT scores used here do not reflect a number of racial groups and can be used to establish corollaries among the HBCUs.

Appendix: Summary of Student Ratings for Foreign Languages

	Difficulty	Enjoyability	Practicality (Education)	Practicality (Employment)
Spanish	4.5	7	8.7	9.4
French	5.3	5.8	7.6	7.7
German	9.0	5.1	2.6	2.7
Japanese	9.8	6.3	6.3	8.3

Ratings are all based on a scale of 1 to 10:

Difficulty:	1=LEAST DIFFICULT/10=MOST DIFFICULT
Enjoyability:	1=LEAST ENJOYABLE/10=MOST ENJOYABLE
Practicality (Education):	1=LEAST IMPORTANT/10=MOST IMPORTANT
Practicality (Employment):	1=LEAST IMPORTANT/10=MOST IMPORTANT

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